BLM News

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Experimental Sage Grouse Tracking Study Underway

Satellites orbiting far above the earth are now tracking a group of sage grouse in northeastern Nevada.

A four-way partnership among the Nevada Division of Wildlife, Boise State University, Idaho State University, and BLM Elko Field Office is conducting the experimental tracking study. The reason for the study is that the long-term decline of sage grouse populations throughout North America has increased the potential for a petition to list sage grouse as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Such a listing would have the potential to affect most public land users.

Nevada Governor Kenny C. Guinn recognized that a listing of sage grouse as an endangered species would have a significant impact on Nevada. Therefore, in August 2000, he assembled diverse interested parties to develop a statewide sage grouse conservation strategy. This statewide strategy calls for the development of local conservation plans utilizing current sage grouse science, emphasizing local involvement and decision-making.

A local conservation plan is being developed for Elko County that includes an evaluation of current risk factors and prioritization of needed management changes at the watershed level. Implementation of land treatments and management changes would be identified through watershed analysis and adaptive management techniques

The Hubbard Vineyard Allotment, located about 30 miles north of Wells, Nevada, provides critical seasonal habitat for sage grouse and was selected as the site for the study. It is also the site for an on-going sharp tailed grouse reestablishment study.

Ray Lister, wildlife biologist for the BLM Elko Field Office, commented, “The Bureau of Land Management is working on a nationwide strategy for sage grouse conservation which will dovetail with the local plans. Sage grouse are an indicator species for the vegetation

communities and landscapes that make up their habitat. That means sage grouse population numbers can be a gauge of the overall ecosystem health."

During the last week of March and first week of April, 2003, capture crews worked at night to trap nineteen sage grouse and fit them with tracking devices. "Catching the birds was quite an exercise," said Lister. "The sage grouse were found using binoculars and a spotlight to locate them by their eye shine. Next the bright light was used in combination with loud music or noise played on a boom box which effectively "froze" the birds and allowed the people on the ground to catch them with large fish nets."

Although tracking devices will help monitor the seasonal movements of sage grouse, identifying critical nesting areas is of most interest to biologists involved in the study. Therefore, sage grouse hens were targeted to be equipped with tracking devices. Eight birds were fitted with satellite telemetry collars and eleven birds were fitted with traditional VHF radio transmitter collars. Five of the eight birds with satellite collars were also equipped with radio transmitter collars so that both tracking techniques can be compared. The use of satellite telemetry is a new technique for tracking sage grouse.

Lister explained, "The satellite transmitters will provide up to one year's data, based on their effective battery life."

"We were very fortunate to be able to capture the number of sage grouse hens needed for the study," Lister added. "Although we were conducting our trapping on or near historic breeding grounds at a time of year when the birds are more concentrated in one area, hens are usually the most difficult to locate and capture."

"In addition to testing the effectiveness of satellite telemetry versus conventional VHF radio telemetry, we also hope to gain a better understanding of the potential impacts that livestock grazing may have to sage grouse nesting habitat. Increasing our knowledge of sage grouse seasonal movements and the specific habitat parameters being selected for nesting will help us develop adaptive grazing management strategies within the Hubbard Vineyard Allotment and elsewhere in Elko County," Lister concluded.

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